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ABSTRACT

In October 1986, 40 women from 12 countries gathered in the Philippines for a 10-day meeting of organizers, educators, and workers affected by and confronting the international electronics industry in microchip plants and in automated offices. Participants were from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, the Netherlands, Trinidad, Jamaica, Mexico, Canada, and the United States. This report summarizes the various issues raised by the women, from their treatment in microchip plants in developing nations to the problems of automated offices in developed countries, and the struggle to organize or unionize women to protect themselves and better their conditions. The summaries fall under several headings: (1) the global context of the problems; (2) stories of women working in the microchips industry; (3) local strategies for fighting back (organizing); (4) linking-up struggles for organizing; and (5) post-conference reflections. An annotated list of resources completes the document. (KC)

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PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION ON MICRO-CHIPS TECHNOLOGY MANILA, PHILIPPINES 1986

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FROM BONDING WIRES TO BANDING WOMEN

PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION ON MICRO-CHIPS TECHNOLOGY
MANILA, PHILIPPINES
1986

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TO THE WOMEN
WORKERS
OF THE WORLD

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Introduction

In October 1986, 40 women from 12 countries gathered in the Philippines for a ten-day meeting called "Micro-chip Technology: Its Impact on the Lives of Women Workers." The meeting was sponsored jointly by three women's organizations in the Philippines, the Center for Women's Resources, the Women's Center and the KMK (Women Worker's Movement), as well as the Participatory Research Group in Canada and the Women's Program of the International Council on Adult Education.

The participants were organizers, educators and workers affected by and confronting the international electronics industry in micro-chip plants and in automated offices. They came from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Hongkong, Japan, the Netherlands, Trinidad, Jamaica, Mexico, Canada and the United States.

The program began with a five-day exposure tour of Manila, the Export Processing Zones of Baguio City and Bataan, the area around the U.S. Naval Base in Olongapo and the sugar-plantation region of Negros. Guided by women from the Philippines, the participants met women workers, labour organizers, poor rural women, and women's movement activists. These visits helped provide a framework for understanding Third World realities.

As the participants shared experiences, problems and strategies in organizing, the theme of the discussion began to take shape: developing a global perspective of the oppression of women in the micro-electronics industry. The conference also tackled the role of multinationals and the global economy as well as the political context and the position of women in each country. Information on new developments, such as the widespread job loss being caused by the automation

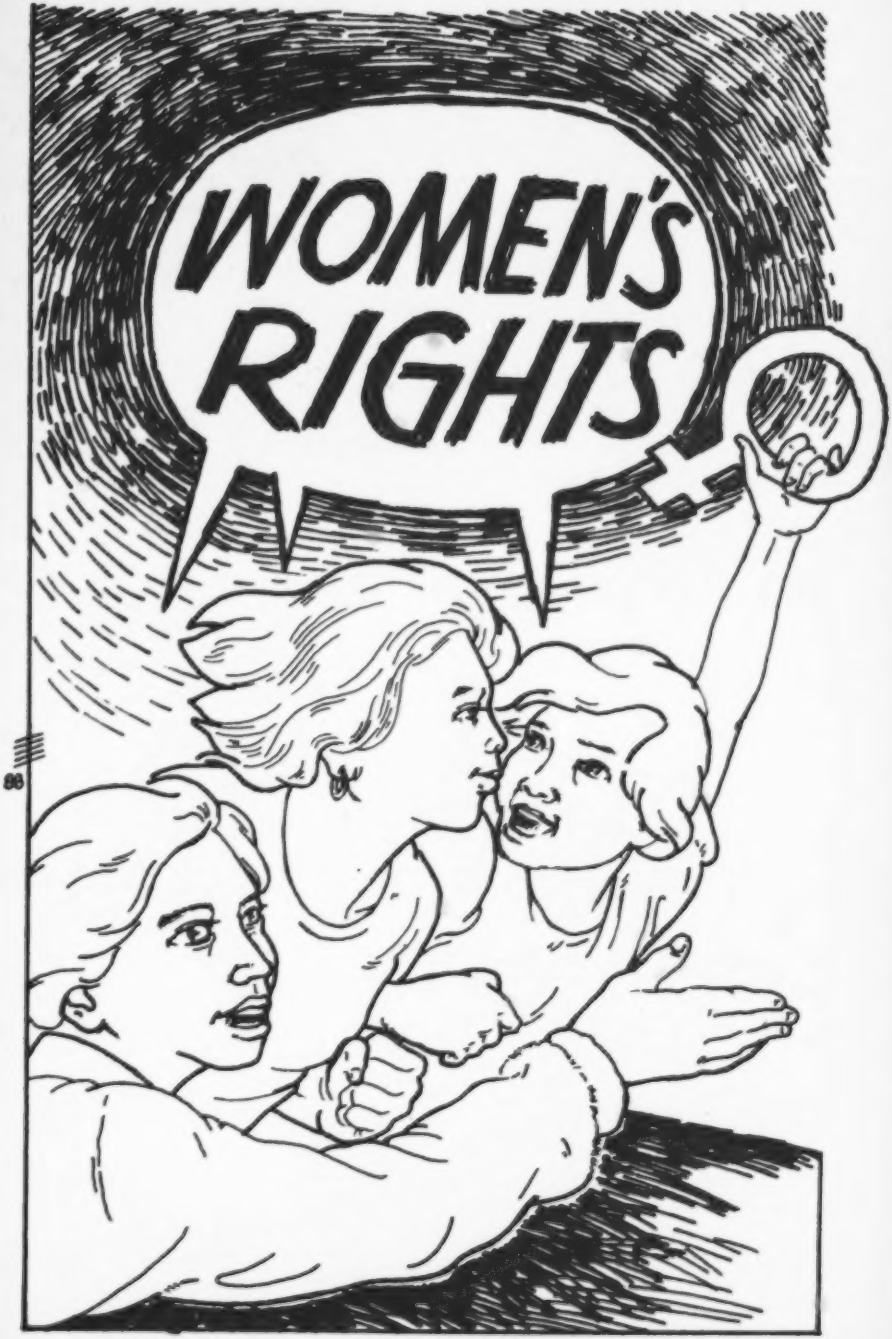
of production in the micro-chip industry, were exchanged too.

The sharing during the conference revealed that workers' organizations and women's movements in different regions of the world are recognizing the need for an effective political response to the worsening conditions of women workers – a response which develops links with different social movements. The conference concluded with a strong commitment to share these lessons and to begin building a strong international solidarity network among women workers.

This booklet documents the highlights of this unique occasion, when women working at different points along the global assembly line came together, shared experiences and learned from each other. It is based on presentations, interviews, written materials and key issues raised at the meeting. We have also included the testimonies of the participants since we think their stories clearly bring out the commonalities in the experiences and struggles of women workers in different regions of the world. In many instances, we did not give the real names of the speakers because of security problems in their countries.

This booklet is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of the entire global assembly line, nor is it a full summary of the conference proceedings. Rather, we hope that it serves as a tool for organizers and popular educators to further understand the struggles of women in the global assembly line.

Organizing Committee
Micro-chip Technology Meeting
Manila, Philippines
May, 1988


WOMEN'S
RIGHTS

We would like to thank all of the women who attended the conference. Their insightful analysis and inspiring commitment to women workers' struggles and to international solidarity made the meeting an enriching and supportive occasion.

We would also like to thank the following organizations for their generous financial assistance to the conference and this booklet: Agricultural Missions, USA; Primate's World Relief and Development Fund. Anglican Church of Canada; Asian and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education; Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace; Canadian International Development Agency; CUSO–Caribbean Division; Global Ministries, United Methodist Church, USA; Intermedia, National Council of Churches, USA; Lutheran Church Women, USA; Oxfam-Canada; Women's Program, Presbyterian Church, USA; Presbyterian World Service and Development, Canada; and, Division of World Outreach, United Church of Canada.

Our Global Context

The discussion of the condition of women workers around the world opened with an overview of the major economic and political forces shaping their lives. Participants from Southeast Asia, Mexico and the Caribbean explained that since the Second World War, the United States and its allies have become increasingly dominant in these regions, controlling resources, production and markets. Enormous wealth is extracted from Third World countries by the U.S., the multinational corporations and financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These entities which share common political and economic interests see to it that Third World governments follow economic programs and thrusts that are consistent with U.S. corporate and expansionist designs.

Since 1965, in keeping with U.S. dictated import liberalization policies, many Third World governments have adopted export-oriented policies. Taking advantage of the ready supply of cheap labor, multinational corporations have established factories whose products are primarily for export rather than for domestic markets. While most manufacturing was concentrated in industrialized countries before the 1960s, since then multinationals have increased their flexibility and profits by spreading production around the globe.

An important aspect of this whole process and of the increasing influence of multinationals has been the development of the global assembly line. It is called such because workers in many regions of the world assemble different components of the same product, as if they were on the same production line.

Much of the work on the global assembly line is performed in special economic zones, called either Export Processing Zones or Free Trade Zones. Established to attract multinationals, these zones are areas where raw materials or components can be imported, assembled into other types of components or finished goods, and then re-exported without payment of the usual duties. Other incentives include access to cheap raw materials, tax breaks, freedom to hold on to all profits and avoid currency controls, anti-union laws, a zone police force, and the absence of health and safety regulations. These zones allow multinationals to further maximize their profits.

There are now over 50 Export Processing Zones around the world, employing more than one million workers. Over 80 percent of this huge work force are women, and 70 percent of them are located in South and Southeast Asia. Most of these women workers are concentrated in three industries: electronics, clothing and textiles.

Many Third World governments see export-oriented development and Free Trade Zones as new strategies to provide jobs for the unemployed, transfer new technology and skills and increase their foreign exchange reserves. In reality, the effect of this policy has been to create short-term unskilled jobs and hazardous working conditions and to further drain the country's foreign exchange. Moreover, technological development only takes place in the multinationals' home countries, and not in the Third World countries where assembly work is being done.

The participants discussed how the U.S. and its allies maintain their controlling influence in Third World countries by working in collusion with the local ruling elites. In Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and South Korea, for example, severe repression of political activity goes hand in hand with anti-union laws to guarantee a docile and cheap labor force for the multinationals.

The participants related how during the past twenty years, multinational corporations have moved their factories from one Export Processing Zone to another, taking advantage of tax breaks and low wages, and closing down when workers demand their rights. Multinationals use the threat of plant closures to intimidate workers who fight for better wages and working conditions or who organize unions. In this way, workers in different regions are played off against each other.

The conference also looked at the economic and political situation in industrialized countries, and agreed that during the 1970s and 1980s, these regions have experienced economic crises and intensifying economic competition between countries. Recent examples are the trade disputes between the U.S. and Japan, and the U.S. and Europe. In many industrialized countries today, governments are in the hands of right-wing parties who cut social

services, spurring unemployment, and a serious rise in poverty. In this context, many multinationals that use the global assembly line are now bringing back assembly work to their home countries, where they exploit the large numbers of poor black and immigrant women workers, who virtually constitute a "Third World" within industrialized countries.

Another development in the past decade has been the use of equipment produced on the global assembly line to automate office work, primarily in industrialized countries. This has caused

major changes for clerical workers, majority of whom are women. As government and business offices automate, looking for ways to increase productivity and lower their costs, clerical workers experience serious health problems, increased surveillance of their work and greater loss of control over their jobs.

The global assembly line takes another twist when automated clerical work performed by office workers in North America is sent, through advanced telecommunications systems, to the Caribbean. This "export of data-processing" is mushrooming as many companies, such as American Airlines, use sophisticated technology to take advantage of cheap labor in Third World regions.

With all this as background, the participants discussed the specific conditions under which they work and struggle for change.

Working in the Microchips Industry: Our Stories and Our Struggles

Micro-chip production begins in North America, Europe and Japan where research and design for micro-chips are carried out and where assembly workers, often black women and immigrant women, fabricate wafers (large sheets of micro-chips).

These wafers are sent to factories in the Export Processing Zones of Southeast Asia, where women factory workers, working for poverty wages in dangerous working conditions, cut, bond and test the chips, and in some cases, assemble them into electronic equipment.

The assembled micro-chip is exported back to North America, Europe or Japan at a relatively low cost. Since the value added to the product is determined by the wages paid in the Third World, import duty is very low. These micro-chips are then used in products such as computers, calculators or watches, which are most often put together by black women and immigrant women in North American and European factories. The computers and office equipment produced are used in offices, where they are transforming clerical work.

The women at the conference highlighted the role of multinational corporations as central actors in this global assembly line. On a world-wide basis, multinationals account for an overwhelming share of production and trade of micro-chips and electronic equipment. The delegates from Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia and the Philippines spoke of the many incentives available in the Export Processing Zones in their countries, low wages forced on workers, lack of health and safety regulations and repression of trade unions. As a result, multinational companies have earned profits as high as 85 times their original investments.

Competition among multinationals is an important factor in determining the direction and development of micro-chip production and trade. One example of this is the recent intense competition between U.S. and Japanese chip-makers, which has led to the increasing use of automated assembly lines to cut labor costs.

This example was graphically illustrated by the sobering news from many Asian participants that in the past eight years, massive unemployment has been on the rise in the micro-chip industry. This is caused by two factors. First is the slump in sales and production in the micro-chip industry, following its peak in 1978-1979 worldwide. Second is the elimination of thousands of jobs across Southeast Asia as corporations increasingly introduce automation to the production line. Women have been the hardest hit by these developments.

Automation of the production process allowed Signetics Thailand, for example, to drastically cut down its work force so as to become 10 times as productive. In the Philippines, it allowed Philips in 1984 to reduce its manpower from one worker for every machine, to one worker tending five machines.

Aside from loss of jobs, the other ill effects of automation are very similar in every region: increased health hazards, further loss of control over workplace environments, greater difficulties in organizing workers, denial of job security, reduced working hours and more pressure for "voluntary" resignation. Far from being a measure of progress, automation has wrought such a devastating effect on workers, because in most countries, governments have failed to provide workers with protection against the arbitrary actions of multinationals.

Insecurity of workers' jobs is further heightened by new management strategies to raise profits at the expense of workers' welfare. These include: sub-contracting, some specific parts of the production process from the main factories to small sweatshops where workers face even lower wages and worse conditions, increasing part time work and raising production quotas.

To counter these problems, however, has been the rise of strong and militant trade union movements, which are making their presence felt in factories along the global assembly line. These militant unions have proven to be an effective tool of workers against the exploitative terms set by multinational corporations. However, multinationals are able to undermine workers' organized action with the threat of closing factories and shifting these to "friendly" countries. This in the end results in increased unemployment often leaving them without due compensation.

Following is a series of reports from some of the women workers present at the conference. Because of repressive conditions and company harassment of union activists in their countries, their real names must remain anonymous.

■Philippines: The Story of Nancy

Nancy works at Texas Instrument (TI), one of the largest electronics companies in the world, with 50 subsidiaries in 19 countries. In 1980, Texas Instruments set up assembly operations in the Baguio City Export Processing Zones. This wholly American-owned factory produces semi-conductors, calculators, electronic educational products and integrated circuit micro-chips.

There are 1,800 of us working at Texas Instruments Philippines. Female production operators and testers comprise 85 percent of the workers, while the other 15 percent are male technicians.

Although a high school diploma is the minimum educational requirement to land a job at TI, most workers are young college graduates, with degrees in chemical and electrical engineering, commerce, medical technology and education. Most of our co-workers have no previous work experience; the rest were previously employed as teachers, bookkeepers, secretaries, receptionists and clerks.

In our country, college-educated women are forced to do factory work because of the serious under-employment problem. If ever jobs are available one has to contend with starvation wages as low as U.S.$1-1.80 a day.

Before being hired at TI, applicants are screened, and then interviewed three times. In the interviews, they ask questions about whether you are married, whether you are interested in unions, what organizations you have joined in college and outside college, and whether you have worked in a unionized work place. If one ever had any connection with a union, then the possibility of being hired is nil.

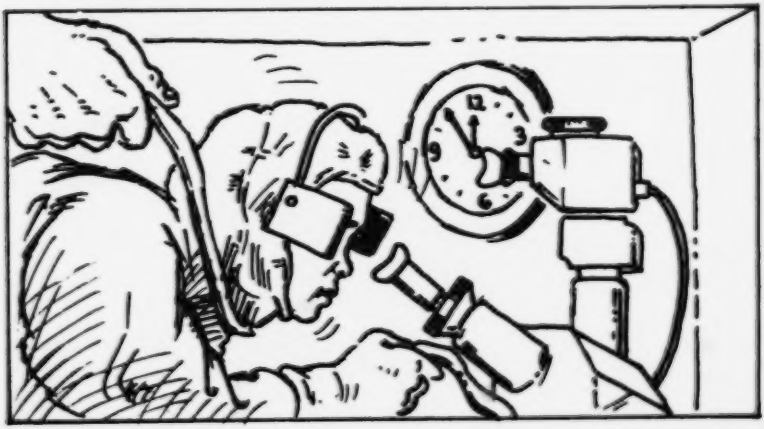
A common practice at TI and other companies is to lay off workers just before the end of their probationary period. In 1984, Texas Instruments laid off 342 probationary workers, using the excuse of delays in orders and a broken-down machine. In 1986,

TI recalled the workers and put them through another probationary period. When TI started in the early '80s, probationary status lasted only three months, now it lasts six months.

When TI hires workers, we are trained on the job in very specific tasks in the assembly and test operations, such as bonding wires and dipping circuits in chemicals. Many workers do not even know the names of the chemicals they handle. And more importantly, management does not teach us to know or understand the whole process of semi-conductor and micro-chip production, and how our work fits in. So we learn no real skills, and whatever knowledge we gain is fragmented.

We are paid from U.S.$2-3.50 per day, according to our status (regular or probationary) and our performance (based on performance reviews). Management favoritism also plays a role in deciding who will receive wage increases. When we ask for a wage increase, they say that it is not possible because TI profits are too small!

Benefits for TI workers include meal subsidies, credit cooperative membership, life insurance, family hospitalization, as well as a variety of leave packages: medical, vacation, maternity, paternity, and compassionate. But at the same time these benefits are offered to us, we are subtly denied them. The company has a "no absences" scheme, which gives workers who have not taken advantage of their benefits, incentives ranging from give away items to plaques of appreciation.



TI assembly line workers are divided into groups. The group with the highest production in a month is given incentives like key chains, plates, cups and household appliances. As a result, the company does not need to set any production quotas. Given the relatively high wages and incentives offered the best groups, the workers take it upon themselves to set higher levels of production and output. This forces us to compete among ourselves, and unfortunately many of my co-workers do that enthusiastically.

Texas Instruments occupies a spanking new building complex that is the ultimate in cleanliness, with sterile, antiseptic workshops and centralized air-conditioning. The factory (any micro-chip plant, for that matter) has to be clean, with strict environmental standards and purification and filtration systems. This is all to reduce the likelihood of damage to the micro-chips from dust or other contaminants in the air or from chemicals used in production. The workers are given filter-paper masks, cotton gloves and finger cots, safety glasses and ground straps. But these are intended not to protect us, but to protect the chips from us! It is the well-being of the chips that is foremost in the company's mind.

Accidents are common on the assembly line because we are forced to take risks. Every day, we are exposed to hazardous chemicals like ethylene, liquid nitrogen, and mold compound, and we inhale the noxious fumes emitted by these chemicals. The microscopes we use in production wear down our vision in less than two years. We also frequently suffer from respiratory ailments,

because the machines reach high levels of heat, while at the same time the air conditioner blasts the room icy cold exposing us to two extremes of temperature.

In one department there, is an x-ray machine, which is used to check the integrated circuits for defects. The workers there wear rubber gowns and an x-ray detector. The management downplays the dangers of radiation, saying it will not affect us. But every day, the detectors show that we have been exposed to some radiation. The management says that this is no problem, because it is just a small amount. When workers become pregnant, they are not advised to work elsewhere, and many do not realize that radiation will harm them.

We work in three eight-hour shifts, for six days a week. But we are also forced to do overtime every second Sunday. They lock us into the factory. This means we only get two days off in a month. Worst of all, our overtime compensation is a ridiculous 6 U.S. cents an hour.

The atmosphere carefully cultivated at Texas Instruments is that of a big, happy family. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as "TI-ers," rather than workers with a class identity. "TI-ers" are promoted as a rare breed, an elite group of achievers above other workers, and so they find it difficult to identify with fellow workers, which creates divisions among them.

TI management rewards us – its "children" – with outings, excursions and discos, which strengthen "family ties." Workers at all levels, including the janitors, are accorded respect and treated as equals. All workers are encouraged to take up their problems, complaints and suggestions with any level of management, even with the company president himself. So we often see top level

managers in informal one-on-one encounters or exchanging news with workers. This gives the management the image of approachability and "sensitivity" to the workers' needs. With such constant back-patting and cheering, "TI-ers" consider themselves indeed lucky to be working in "TI-heaven," and look forward to another day of outdoing each other in performance and output.

All these are clearly meant to discourage unionizing and labor unrest at TI. The Marcos government helped the company by declaring all Export Processing Zones "union free," in order to lure foreign investment into the country, even when this was at the expense of our own people. When we are hired at TI, the contract specifically states a no-union clause. We are barraged with management propaganda about our very high wages, benefits and incentives – so some workers think, "Why unionize?"

Some other workers do feel they have problems working at TI. But they are afraid to talk to management about these, because they will be accused of being union organizers. Because of these pressures, workers are suspicious of union organizers. Those of us who are interested in having a union do not discuss this inside the factory, as management spies on us. Also, we fear that those who are opposed to unions might report us to the management. Then the personnel office would call us one by one, and question us about unions. So I can not even approach other workers myself. I simply collect names of women who are interested in unions and then pass them on to outside organizers, who talk to workers in their homes.

The company says that none of the TI factories around the world have unions, and that some plants have closed because a union was formed by the workers. They use this to threaten the workers. Some workers who tried to form a union were laid off during the retrenchment period in 1984, and were not re-hired when full operations resumed. At this stage, we are supported by only a small minority of TI workers, but we are sure our support will grow.

■Malaysia: The Story of Lu

Lu has been working at an electronics factory in Malaysia for three years. When she first started, the management asked her if she knew anything about unions. She didn't really know what a union was, so she said, "No." Now, Lu understands why they asked that question.

I work on micro-chips, doing wire-bonding through a microscope. A wire comes down, you look through the scope and thread the wire with tweezers and then you make a small knot, not too light or too thick. This took me about two months to learn, and during all this time the supervisors were putting pressure on me, saying I was a slow learner. But once I learned I was fast, provided I was given a good machine.

I used to work very hard. When you do a good job your name is put up in lights as the "best bonder." They were very hard on me, pressing me to do so much work, but then my name would be up there and I would feel so proud. And you are given a Parker pen with your name engraved on it.

I usually have very bad backaches and headaches every day. Sometimes, it becomes so severe that when somebody says "Hi," it hurts my head. I keep my hair short and pour water on my head every day, because I don't want to take too many tablets. And I can't read long without my eyes watering.

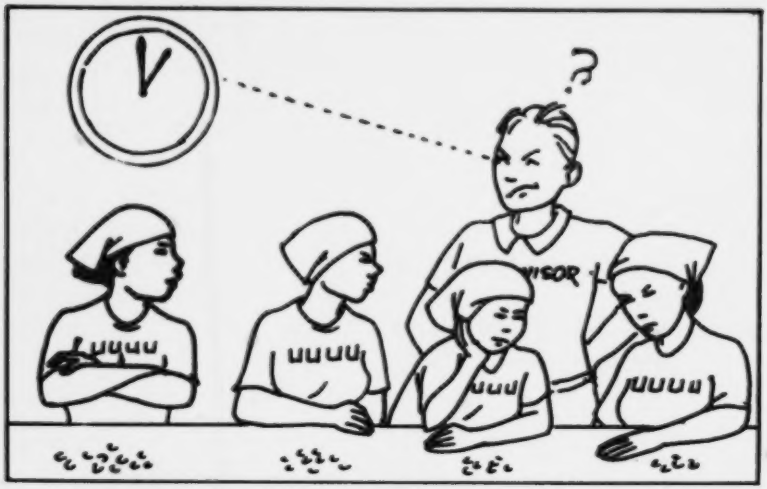
One day I was not feeling well, and I was given a bad machine, so I couldn't do my work well. The supervisor shouted at me. "You're not doing a good job. You must have been dating last night, and you're thinking about your date." That really irritated me so I told him not to shout at me. Suddenly, he changed the tone of his voice and said, "It's all right, let's talk it over. "Later he called me to a room, offered me coffee and asked me what my problems were. I said I didn't have any problems. I just didn't like the way he shouted at me. He apologized and after that he

was nice to me. Then, I realized that if you do whatever he says, he pushes you too hard. But if you fight for your rights, then he is less hard.

I live with some friends in a hostel. The company pays half of our rent and we pay the other half. There are four of us in a room. If any of our friends come, they can't stay with us in the hostel. We have to talk to them outside. The guard comes to our rooms and tells us that we can't watch TV after ten o'clock because we have to go to work tomorrow. The guard is the only man that can come into the rooms. Even if our fathers come to see us, we have to see them outside.

We work eight hours a day and our wage is Malaysian $1.65 an hour, which is only 62 U.S. cents. We work six days a week, and we change shifts every two weeks.

Sometimes, we are forced to do overtime every day. One time, all of us did overtime for a month. At the end of the month, the supervisor told us that he had lost our overtime slips so he couldn't pay us. We told him we could remember how many hours of overtime we had done, but he said he couldn't trust us.



There were three of us who were quite brave at that time, and we would fight for our rights on an individual basis. So we said, "Why don't we all work together on this matter?" We were mostly Malays and Indians on that line and the Malay girls had been budgeting for the coming festival, so they were angry. But we talked and we all agreed to stop working the next day at 1 p.m. Some girls were a bit frightened, but finally they said, "OK, if somebody starts it off, then we will follow." Some of the other girls were worried that we would all get fired but we said, "There are 40 of us. People will notice. We will go to the press."

At 1 pm the next day, we all stopped working and just sat in our places. The supervisor came around and asked, "What's wrong, why have all of you stopped working?" We told him we wanted our overtime pay. He said, "I'll go talk to the management. Please continue your work." We answered, "No you find out from the management first. We'll wait for you." He was so panicky, you could see it in his face. He ran to the office to speak to the management. Then he came back and said, "Send one representative to talk for all of you." We said, "No we all want to speak." Then he said, "OK tomorrow by lunch, I'll pay you."

We told him if we weren't paid, we would do the same thing the next day. So the next day, at lunch time we were all paid our overtime.

After that the three of us were closely watched. The supervisor thought that we were provoking the other girls and he got very angry with us. He tried to make us work at washing the toilets, but we refused. Then one of us was put into another line to work with chemicals. She was pregnant at that time and she knew the chemicals were bad for her, so she left. The other girl was given a "promotion." She was put on office hours which means she goes for lunch at a different time and can't meet the girls. She didn't want the "promotion" but she had to take it or lose her job.

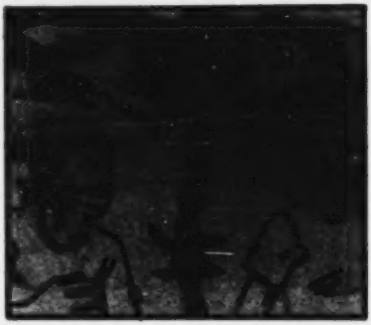
They kept me there doing bonding work but they told me not to talk to groups of girls and not to go into other lines. If I did, they would ask the girls what I had said. When they separated the three of us like that, it frightened the others. They didn't want it to happen to them. But I said, somebody has to start it.

At that time, I didn't know whom to approach for help. I didn't know anything about organizing. I didn't know how to talk to the girls; I was alone. I thought to myself, "I'm going to give up on this. I'm going to leave." Then one day, I met a woman at the bus stop. She spoke to me and asked me questions about where I worked. I was so fed up I just told her my whole story. And then, she said she belonged to a women's organization and would I like to come to a meeting.

So I joined the group and I told them I was going to leave the company. But the other women said, "No, don't leave. No matter which factory you go to, the same thing will happen." They appreciated how we had fought against the company, and they said, "You shouldn't be fighting by yourself. You will be easily defeated. You need a group, and you need unity."

■Indonesia: The Story of Saida

Saida lives in Indonesia which has a population of 160 million, of which more than two thirds live off agriculture while the rest work in services and industry, including electronics. A large part of the business sector in her country is foreign owned. Only one percent of the Indonesian people own property, and unemployment is more than 30 percent.



Indonesia has been ruled by President Suharto and the military since a bloody coup in 1965. While it is supposedly a democratic state, elections are a farce, and anyone critical of the government is considered subversive and risks life imprisonment or death. The major problems besetting political organizing are harassment by the military as well as the use of religion to divide workers.

I grew up in a village in a big family of six girls and six boys. Our village is only a memory now, as it disappeared from existence, submerged under a lake as part of a hydro-electric and water-irrigation scheme. My family lost our farm. When I was 15, just before the final exam in junior high school, I decided to move to Jakarta to find "a better life."

I went to work for a U.S.-owned multinational electronics company, which was first established in Indonesia in 1974, with 250 workers. By 1978, 7,000 people were working at the company. But all of us eventually lost our jobs when the company closed down.

When I started working in 1980, I received 625 rupiahs a day (about 95 U.S. cents). Six years later, when the factory closed, I was earning about U.S.$2 a day. These wages were not enough to support me, and I often had to go to my brother for financial help. But I was happy to have a job and be earning money with my own sweat.

Like most of the workers in the factory, I worked in the production department. My job was bonding integrated circuits. We had to wire transistor chips to aluminum bases, using a microscope. Our eyes, constantly peered through microscopes, and as a result they were terribly strained. I had to repeat the process 450 times in one day. Later on, when semi-automatic machines were used, we had to produce 3,000 units of integrated circuits per day.

I suffered severe headaches and exhaustion. Many of us found that we could no longer see things at a distance, and we had to get eyeglasses. Until 1983, the company refused to give us even a small allowance for buying eyeglasses. Other workers suffered from different kinds of problems with their kidneys and lungs. But the company refused to consider them occupational diseases. The company also denied us the health benefits we were entitled to.

They also used different tricks like beauty contests and birthday parties to divert our attention from the way we were being exploited.

In 1980 the factory had 6,700 workers, 90 percent women. Everytime a new machine was introduced into the factory, some workers were put out of work. Eventually, before the closure of the factory in 1986, there were only 625 workers left.

In 1981, the workers started to fight for a union. This was immediately opposed by the company, and they dismissed a union activist. Later they gave their approval for the formation of a Workers' Representative Council. At first, the Council fought for the workers' rights. However, some of the leaders started taking bribes from the company, and gradually they became nothing more than management puppets.

In 1983, we heard that new machines were going to be used in the factory. They were fully computerized, and we called them "robots." Their introduction meant that more workers could be dismissed, because each "robot" took over the jobs of five workers. The company started trying to persuade the workers to resign with a compensation of 300,000 rupiahs which was only about U.S.$400.

In the middle of this mass dismissal, a trade union was formally established in 1984. However, the company used the excuse of financial loss to dismiss 500 workers in early 1985. The

company did this by frightening workers, saying that if they did not resign willingly, the company would have to use force and they would never get compensation money. This seemed to be effective, as by the end of 1985 there were only 625 workers left, or less than nine percent of the original total.

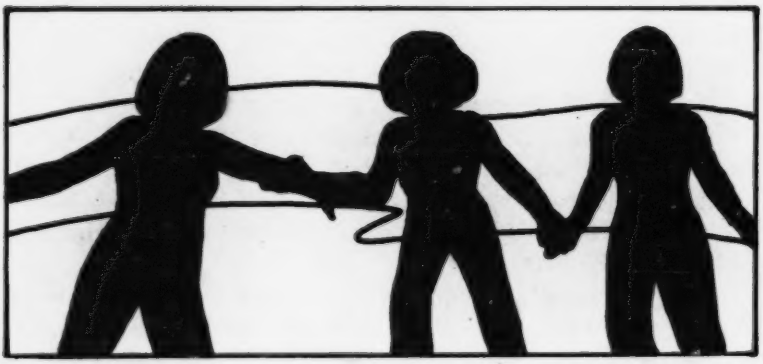
In the beginning of 1986, the company announced that it would cease production within six months. Workers were promised compensation of 1 million rupiahs, about U.S.$1,300, excluding tax deductions.

By then my friends and I had begun to be aware of our rights. We refused to accept this arbitrary decision, and kept on fighting. The compensation was increased to three million rupiahs, or U.S.$4,000. The company insisted that we pay the tax. But they only deducted seven percent, when the legally required amount is 15 percent. So we don't know where that money really went.

The factory was closed two months ahead of schedule, and in May 1986 we all lost our jobs. The company had never provided us with any skills that would be useful if we lost our jobs. Of course, we were never told what the integrated circuits were for, only that they were needed to make satellites and other super-modern machines.

After a serious talk among ourselves, we decided to try to establish a cooperative business with our joint compensation money.

So my experience as a worker was a brief one. But it taught me so much about fighting for one's rights, and about the need for solidarity among workers.



■Canada : Grappling With New Technology in the Office

One workshop at the conference – which included participants from Jamaica, Trinidad, Canada and the United States – was devoted to the discussion of the impact of electronic technology on clerical workers. The micro-chips which are made by the women in the Export Processing Zones of Southeast Asia are exported to industrialized countries where they are assembled, often by black women and immigrant women, into a multitude of electronic products, including computerized office equipment.

Computerization sales and services are being introduced at a fast pace into offices in many countries of the world, where it is creating new and serious health hazards for female clerical, sales and service workers, as well as more routinized work, new forms of management control and the prospect of massive unemployment.

In Canada, women workers are experiencing major problems directly related to the introduction of this new technology. Office workers, bank tellers, supermarket cashiers, telephone operators, airline ticket agents and library workers – their actual jobs may vary, but their experiences with technological change are very similar. In virtually every sector, the following problems are occuring:

[ ] *Loss of jobs:* The introduction of video display terminals (VDTs) and other new technology is resulting in the complete restructuring of clerical work. One effect of this is that work loads and work speeds are dramatically increased, allowing employers to reduce the number of workers. The total number of clerical and service jobs is already shrinking, and hundreds of thousands of these jobs are expected to disappear in the next decade. Many of the clerical jobs that remain are part-time, with lesser security than the old, permanent full-time jobs.

[ ] *Less Training:* Too often, clerical workers are largely denied access to and training for jobs which require more technical skills and are higher paying. On the other hand, a large number of clerical jobs are reducing the data-entry types of work where knowledge and skills are transferred to a machine and workers become "machine-tenders."

[ ] *Lack of skill recognition:* Some office workers find that using VDTs gives them new skills that are rarely, if ever, recognized in the form of promotions, higher pay and benefits.

[ ] *Increased employer control:* Through electronic-monitoring, employers now measure speed, accuracy and time on and off the machine. They use this information to set productivity quotas, and to try to control every minute of a worker's day. Telephone operators and airline ticket agents also find that supervisors listen to their calls, including personal ones. Shiftwork is increased since employers push for the most "cost effective" use of the computer.

[ ] *Health problems:* VDT operators suffer numerous physical disorders arising from computer terminal work, including eye-strain, dizziness, back pains, headaches and reproductive hazards from the radiation emitted by VDTs.

[ ] *Stress:* VDT operators suffer high incidence of stress-related diseases, health hazards, electronic monitoring, and all the other problems associated with the new technology. Computer monitoring causes stress, because you are being watched all day, and because the technology is taking control away from workers and giving it to management.

[ ] *Home-work:* Some companies are beginning to promote home-work as the ideal solution for women with family responsibilities. But home-workers are paid on a piece-work basis, enjoy no benefits and have no chance to organize with other workers.

[ ] *Union-busting:* A company whose employees unionize can shift production to a low-wage or non-union region of the country or the world. One U.S. company has already broken a strike in this way.

Technological change has been hailed as the solution to our economic problems, with the claim that reduced labor costs will lower the price of Canadian exports, and reduce government spending. But the government has ignored numerous studies, many conducted by their own departments which showed the negative impact of new technology on women workers. As direct employer of hundreds of thousands of women workers, government not only refuses to grant workers the most basic protection, in some cases it also uses its power to pass laws to deny its employees the right to negotiate issues related to technological change. Neither the federal government nor any provincial government has any laws in place regarding VDTs or technological change in general

Over the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of programs that train women for new "high-tech" jobs in schools and in "community-based" training programs. Many of the women who are trained in these programs are black women

and immigrant women trying to move out of very low-paid factory and service jobs. Women are forced to join these programs because they are being denied training for the "technician-level", "high-tech" and well-paid jobs that accompany the introduction of new technology into the Canadian economy. This reinforces the traditional division of the labor force along sex and race lines, with women stuck in the low-paying female job ghettos.

During the past ten years in Canada, women unionists and the women's movement have begun to have a significant impact on union policies and actions. As a result of women organizing – in women's committees and rank-and-file caucuses – issues such as child care, equal pay for work of equal value, and sexual harassment are becoming real priorities in unions.

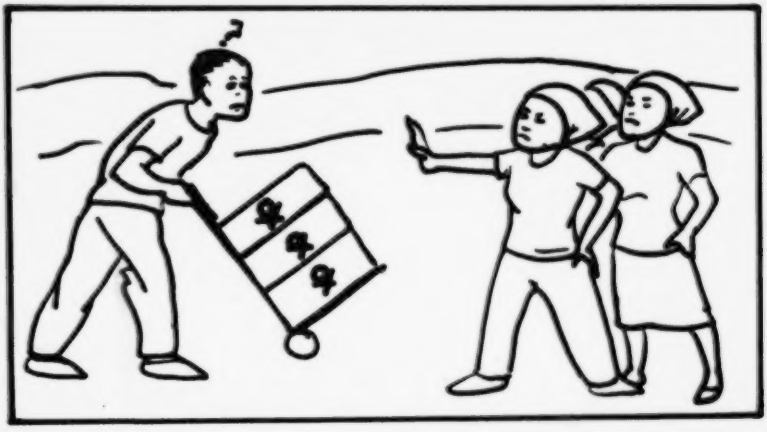
However, many barriers remain against the full participation of Canadian working women in unions. These include the low proportion of working women who are members of unions – particularly in female-dominated jobs – and the failure of unions to really move forward on some policies related to their women members. Other serious obstacles are the ways in which women's responsibilities in their homes, make it difficult for them to become involved in union activities, as well as the sexist attitudes held by many male union members and leaders.

The response of the Canadian labour movement to new technology has been contradictory. Now that the new technology

is firmly in place in many offices and industries, the labor movement is active in fighting for health and safety protections for VDT operators, for recognition of VDT-related illnesses, against electronic monitoring, and for protection against lay-offs. Some unions – in transportation, communications and the post office – have waged major fights on new technology, focusing on issues of re-training, de-skilling and lay-offs.

But not surprisingly, the questions which are most difficult for unions are the larger ones, like the permanent loss of jobs, the nature of work and the work process, and management control over work. There are union activists who are willing to challenge some of these fundamental questions related to new technology But even these activists, who inspired considerable discussions and activity a few years ago, tend to be quite discouraged and unclear about strategy at the present time, now that new technologies are so firmly entrenched in most sectors of the work force.

We need more recognition that a comprehensive – not piecemeal – approach to technological change is needed. We need a strategy that includes challenging sacred "management rights," gaining workers' control over design of software to stop de-skilling, demanding government- or employer-paid intensive re-training, workers exercising their right to refuse unsafe work, finding ways to deal effectively with higher work loads and the accompanying job loss and stress, as well as linking the introduction of new technology with reduced service to the public.



Local Strategies for Fighting Back

The conference discussions confirmed the difficulties in organizing women workers in micro-chip factories and offices, especially in the face of harassment of employers who work in collusion with governments and the machinery of state repression.

Union leaders who collaborate with management are another barrier to workers' struggles. Yet support for pro-worker unions and strategies is growing, along with an increasing recognition that, in the long-term, unions can only be strengthened if they become part of larger movements for social transformation. In some countries, this has already found expression in the initiative of women's organizations and community groups to build alliances with unions around broad social issues.

The strategy that emerged from the discussions centered on two equally important aspects of these efforts. On one hand, the need to build mass-based women's organizations and militant unions that fight for women workers' interests. On the other hand, the development of strong solidarity links between women workers in different countries.

It was also agreed that an important long-term strategy in organizing women workers is for organizers and educators to work together to develop popular education to raise the consciousness of women workers on class, social and political issues. More research is also needed, but this will really only be useful if it is grounded on a strong sense of commitment and accountability to workers' and women's movements.

The participants heard a number of inspiring reports at the conference about women workers' organizing, including the following three, which offer insights into some very different political contexts and approaches to organizing.

■Philippines: The Women Workers' Movement

"The Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK) or the Women Workers' Movement is not a union that bargains with employers," said Cleofe, a KMK activist. "It is a mass organization that takes up the needs of women workers, organizing within unions and among women workers who are not in unions." The KMK was formed in 1984 to unite the largest number of women workers in the Philippines, both organized and unorganized. It now has 15,000 members in the industrial, service, communications and agricultural sectors. This is the report of Cleofe Zapanta, secretary-general of KMK and Jing Porte, from the Women's Center, an educational institution which works closely with the KMK.

We believe that women workers need a separate organization like KMK in order to fight gender oppression as well as class exploitation. We know that it takes a very conscious organizing effort to bring women into the women's movement and workers' organizations. We can do this only when we ensure that trade unions represent the interests of women workers as well as men workers, and the women's movement represents women workers' interests, as well as the interests of other sectors of women. The KMK is expanding, despite the sometimes painful fact that organizing women workers is not always taken seriously by some of our friends.

With the presidency of Cory Aquino, many people expected improvements in the condition of the people, especially of women workers. But women workers and the Filipino people are still undergoing severe repression and exploitation. The old Marcos labor code is still being enforced and violence is still directed at

striking workers; workers on peaceful pickets are being injured and even killed. In 1986, 22 workers were killed, 223 injured and 145 arrested during strikes and mass actions.

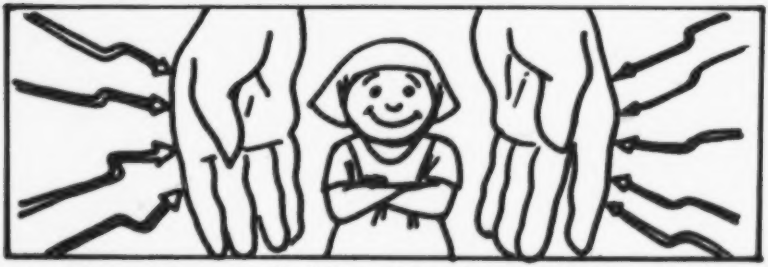
Women workers still receive low wages and are tied to routine "unskilled" assembly line work on export products. We have no hope for promotion and yet are always the first ones affected by lay-offs due to shut-downs and reductions in the work force. We are exposed to hazardous chemicals, especially in the factories of multinationals. We do not have sufficient maternity leave, we are treated as sex objects and are often subject to different forms of sexual harassment. The "apprenticeship" and "piece-rate" systems continue to bind women to lower wages and no job security, compared to "regular" male workers.

Women are still the workhorse in the home. We hurry home to go to the market, cook dinner, wash clothes and take care of the children. Often, there is no or paternity leave for our husbands, thus compelling us women (as expected of us) to solely shoulder domestic and child-rearing matters. There are also no nurseries or day care facilities for the families of workers.

All of this clearly illustrates the distressing condition of women workers in the Philippines, which the KMK is fighting to change.

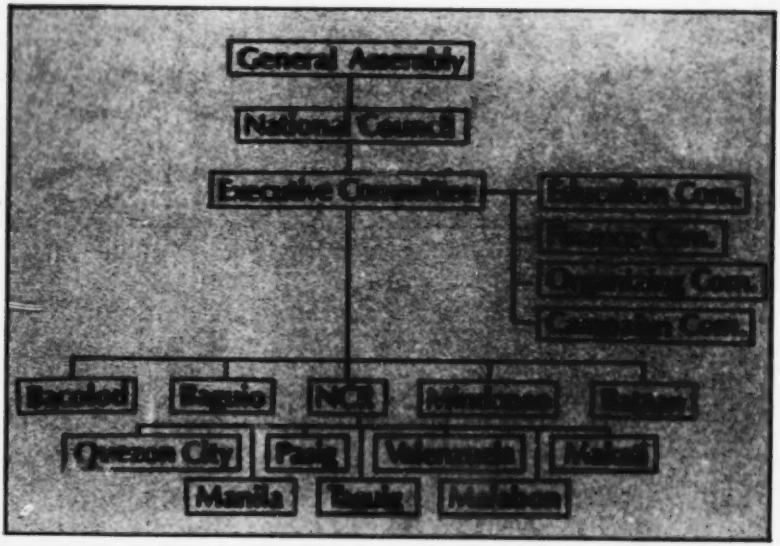
We arrived at the KMK demands – listed below – after launching an education program among 2,000 women workers. The studies, discussions, and sharing of experiences and conditions that ensued led to the concretization of our demands on 11 major issues.

THE FILIPINO WOMEN WORKERS' DEMANDS – KMK



1. Guarantee women's full participation in gainful employment. More jobs to our Filipino women.
2. Women should not be discriminated against because of sex, age or civilian status. Pregnancy should not be made a basis for termination.
3. Equal pay for equal work done. Implement just wages for all Filipino workers – both men and women.
4. Abolish the "piece-rate system" and regularize women workers who have rendered six-months work.
5. Women should have equal access to skilled work or to protected jobs.
6. All women workers should have four-months maternity leave benefits. Employers should also grant one-week paternity leave. Women workers should be given menstruation leave benefits based on the total wage.
7. Workers with families have the right to parental leave in order to respond to family or their children's needs, without prejudice to their job security.
8. In her period of pregnancy, the woman worker has the right to object to any hazardous or heavy jobs which could affect her health or her baby's health (without any penalty).
9. The employers, especially in establishments wherein the majority of workers are women, should provide proper facilities for small children (nurseries or day care centers) near the factories or in nearby communities.
10. Forced overtime should be stopped and employers who continue doing such should be penalized.
11. Sexual harassment in any form should be stopped and be taken up as a union issue.

KMK Organizational Structure



We have a national structure in the KMK, which includes a General Assembly composed of all our members, a National Council with representatives from each region, an Executive Committee, and committees responsible for education, finance, organizing and campaigns, as well as regional councils and municipal coordinating committees.

The Organizing Committee is in charge of expanding the membership and consolidating the activities of KMK chapters. In the Metro Manila region, for example, we have eight full-time and two part-time organizers.

The KMK also gets involved in broader issues through our Campaigns Committee. We organize rallies and protests related to women workers' issues, and we coordinate with the activities of other sectors of women, especially for traditional celebrations like International Women's Day, May 1 and Independence Day.

On the day after our National Congress in 1985 we picketed the Ministry of Labor and Employment to present women workers' demands and issues. Our members have also become active in

political parties, in the union federation and in GABRIELA, the broad coalition of women's organizations.

The education we give is not the same as that of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) or the May First Movement, which provides general education about the situation of the workers in the Philippines. Our education focuses on the specific situation of women workers, including the general condition of women in the Philippines, and how to form KMK chapters in different unions or factories. The Education Committee is responsible for giving the KMK orientation to our members, and also for coordinating other kinds of training – leadership training, speakers' training, organizers' training and instructors' training, as well as material health care education.

Much of the KMK's education is organized through the Women's Center, which was established for women workers in 1983 in Metro Manila. The Center does research and documentation, provides education programs, and publishes educational materials which facilitate organizing efforts among women workers. Our programs at the Center are aimed at raising the consciousness of women workers, and facilitating their awareness of the need to unite with other oppressed sectors of Philippine society. We also train women workers as leaders, speakers, writers and organizers.

One of the responsibilities of the Finance Committee is income-generating programs. KMK chapters organize socio-economic programs, for example in Negros. Thousands of sugar workers in Negros have lost their jobs and are in severe poverty. So we started providing income to our members there through a project for feeding children who are suffering from malnutrition.

KMK and Union Organizing

Most of our members are members of unions under the KMU the militant trade union federation in the Philippines. We work closely with the KMU on women's issues. The KMU now has a Women's Commission which coordinates with us. There are also three women on the KMU National Council, which has a total of 28 members.

When we are working in a workplace with a union whether it's affiliated with the KMU federation or it's an independent union, we try to include our demands in the general union demands. We also try to ensure that the union officers understand our purpose. Because if you can't convince the union officers, it is very hard to have the demands of women workers included. So we try to make sure that all the unions are aware of the issues of the women workers.

We also organize chapters in workplaces with pro-management union or what we call "yellow unions." It is very hard to organize women in "yellow unions," but it is a matter of process and of building alliances. The purpose of these chapters is to change the "yellow" union to a militant one.

One of the KMK's objectives is to organize those women who have no unions. So when we organize chapters in factories that don't have a union, it is the task of the chapter to organize a union there.

One of the secrets of our success as an organization is that a lot of our organizers are workers themselves. I used to work in a department store, but after we formed a union there I decided

to resign and organize other workers. We also find we have more success if we start our organizing efforts with workers' issues, and then relating these to women's issues, rather than the other way around.

It is not only women workers in factories who are organizing under the KMK. In Baguio, for example, the miners' wives are now organizing. We are also planning to affiliate a housewives' organization with the KMK. Some people are also asking us to organize women domestic helpers. We are still thinking about how we can do this, because these workers are scattered in individual households.

We really need to train more women workers to be leaders. At present, the position of women in trade unions is changing for the better. Before, women union officers usually held the traditional positions of secretary and treasurer. But now, there are lots of unions whose presidents are women. That's why we are training more women workers to be leaders.

People from other countries are impressed with our organization, but our movements in the Philippines didn't happen overnight. It took a persistent and focused effort to organize women.

We have also found that it doesn't follow that if you have a very repressive regime (like what we had under Marcos), women will automatically join organizations, or that you will have a militant workers' organization or a militant women's movement. Consciousness is not automatic. We have seen this again and again in many countries around the world, where wages are low, working conditions are very poor, and management have sophisticated means of controlling the workers.

When we neglected women's organizing during the 1970s, after Marcos declared martial law, we lost a lot of ground. We had to work hard to recover this in the past five years.

A very unique feature of our women's movement is its tight links to the movement of the Filipino people for national independence. GABRIELA, which is advancing the women's movement in the Philippines, speaks not only of the aspirations of women workers, peasant women, urban poor women and indigenous women. It also projects U.S. meddling in the domestic affairs of the Philippines, the need for genuine land reform and real nationalist industrialization in the belief that these issues are at the very roots of the problems of the entire Filipino people.

The journey we have to trek in changing the plight of our people, especially the women workers, is still long. But we believe we will be successful, and this vision sustains our commitment. We need to be more united, and to strengthen more our ranks in order to face the problems which hinder us, and to confront the rapidly changing political situation in the Philippines. As part of our program to advance the workers' and women's demands, we are pressing the new regime to fulfill its promises to the workers. We believe that only through a strong, organized movement can this be achieved.

■Malaysia: Organizing Under A Dictatorship

Malaysia has a population of 16 million, of which many live in poverty. The government's policy has been to create an export-oriented economy, which relies heavily on foreign loans and investment. Working conditions are poor, child labor is increasing and each year there are over 500 deaths from workplace accidents. This is the report of the delegate from Malaysia but because of government repression we can not identify the name of the participant.

Although our country has officially been a parliamentary democracy since independence from Britain in 1947, in reality the government is very repressive, with a number of draconian laws such as the Internal Security Act. If you criticize the government, you are likely to be jailed without trial. It's a terrible threat hanging over our heads. Political activists and their families are harassed and threatened by the Police Special Branch. Some people who have been imprisoned come out with completely changed views. The government also tries to intensify divisions among the three major ethnic communities – Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Our organization came together eight years ago to address the special problems of women. We hold education classes for women in the urban and rural sectors and we have a People's Popular Program aimed at teaching women their basic rights. We've also started a kindergarten program in a squatter area for the children of workers. Some members of our organization are nurses who want to start a medical program in the communities we are working in. In fact, we've already started using the kindergarten on weekends as a clinic for children and mothers. General hygiene is one of our main health care problems, because the whole environment is so horrible.

Our group does all this work without any full-time organizers. Everybody is a voluntary worker. As a result our organizing work cannot expand very fast because we are also tied down to our families and jobs. To do all that and still have time for organizing is very, very difficult.

Union Organizing in the Free Trade Zones

In 1970, the government introduced an Industrialization Plan and started the Free Trade Zones. We have been trying to organize a union in the FTZ, but so far we've been unsuccessful because of the highly restrictive legal requirements of the Trade Union Act and other anti-labor policies of the government. These repressive laws restrict union organizing. For example, strikes can't be called for union recognition. In some cases, the medical leave of more than ten people in the same department is defined as a "strike."

It is also difficult to organize the electronics sector because each industry is required to have a national union, and we don't have one in electronics. And when we electronics workers tried to join the Electrical Union, the Registrar of Unions said our jobs are not similar enough and would not let us join.

The Police Special Branch also puts pressure on us. Every time we have a meeting at our office, there is a car parked outside with an agent inside it. He doesn't do anything, he just sits there. Whenever we have a meeting, the following night we can't sleep. One time, when organizing in the electronics sector was getting strong, one of the officers from the Special Branch called up one organizer and tried to threaten her.

Sometimes, after our own shifts, we go to other factories and wait outside for the girls to come out. But many of them don't want to talk to us; they are suspicious. So we have to depend on friends. We say, "Since you are not interested in the union, please introduce us to somebody whom you think is interested." She then might take us to meet a friend who is more outspoken and who would like to join.

When someone comes to our meetings, we try to encourage her to join up with other workers, rather than fighting managers on her own. We don't immediately push women to fight for unions. We first help them understand things closer to their lives like their pay slips and how to calculate the wages and benefits they're owed. Then we talk about organizing and we provide education programs on trade unions.

Right now, we're putting together a primer for electronics workers. To get information about the companies in the industry, we went to the Registrar of Companies and got some information which says that multinationals have been operating at a loss for a couple of years. That's unbelievable. We need the correct information to calculate the rate of exploitation of workers in those companies. It's very important for the workers to know this.

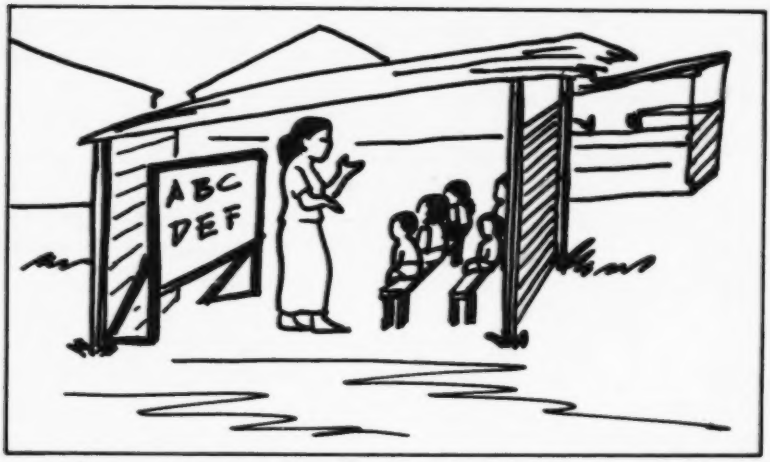
We also organize seminars at the local level, and sometimes at the national level to consolidate our work. We have education programs for organizers that include information about the situation of women in Malaysia, the composition of the work force, number of women workers and the women's groups that exist in Malaysia.

Another way we try to reach out to workers is through drama. We put on skits which present different aspects of the workers' problems. We performed for the Malaysian Trade Union Congress, at the International Women's Day rally, and for the electronics workers who got together to support the striking Mostek workers.

Organizing in Rubber Plantations

We are also doing some organizing work among workers in rubber plantations. Sometimes, we use drama there as well. We particularly focus on the issue of *paraquat*. Paraquat is the cheapest pesticide in the world today and it's very dangerous. Workers go blind if it splashes in their eyes and they die if it gets into their bloodstream. Many women on the plantations have died from being sprayed with paraquat.

Plantation workers don't have time to read newspapers, nor the money to buy them. Because of the falling prices of rubber, their take-home pay is very low. So we send them newsclippings to keep them informed about their plight and other issues.



The squatter area where we work is on the edges of the railway track. Many of the people who work in the Free Trade Zone go there to live. The houses are considered illegal and the government can demolish them any time.

The houses are very poor and small, one room sometimes two rooms. People have to wait for nightfall to go to the "bathroom" in the bushes at the back of the shanties. There is no electricity, just oil lamps, and water is a big problem.

We started a kindergarten program for the children. Otherwise, they would just be hanging around because their parents can't afford to send them to a pre-school. We charge a small fee to impress on the people the value of education. At the end of every month, the parents come to pay the fees, and I talk to them and ask them about their work. Sometimes, after work I go to their houses and talk to them about their children and their jobs. In this way, we are reaching the parents, through the children. But with retrenchment increasing all the time, the numbers of children are declining because they stay with their unemployed parents.

Repression in our country is also very hard to resist. Our fight is lonely and frightening, and at times we're not sure whether it's worth it. Our organization is so new, we don't want to be nipped in the bud. But we are starting to see the development of solidarity and our strength.

■United States: Educating and Organizing Clerical Workers

"What office workers in North America are now facing is nothing less than a sweeping technological revolution," said Liza Gallatin, a member of the Office Technology Education Project (OTEP). "We believe that efforts in individual workplaces or individual unions will not be able to influence this or influence government policy, unless we join together." This is Liza's interview.

OTEP is an educational organization, focusing on the impact of new technology on the jobs and health of office workers who are mostly women. Our goal is to use our educational work as a vehicle for organizing, because we know that without unions, clerical workers are not going to be able to exercise any control over the new technology.

All our educational programs include skills training and leadership development. In a unionized office, we try to help workers take an active leadership role on new technology issues by forming "technology committees." In non-unionized offices, we find that organizing around new technology can be a collective experience which will eventually lead the workers to decide to form a union.

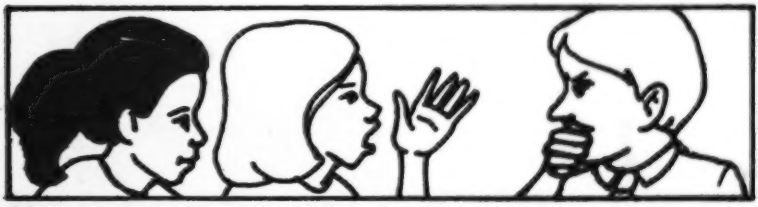
Unorganized Workers

Unorganized women workers are often the hardest hit by the introduction of new technology. They are also the most vulnerable and least able to stand their ground in the face of changes in the workplace. So, we make it a priority to reach out to unorganized clerical workers.

But the problem is that it's very hard for us to reach unorganized workers. We've tried a number of different approaches. One is to contact unions in the area and find out where they are starting organizing efforts. Then we can either use their contacts or try to arrange an educational program at their office. We find that this approach of going through unions can be quite successful. It means that we can do the initial work, and then the union can follow up, so the workers will not depend on us for that. OTEP is too small; we just do not have the resources or the staff to be a major help to any organizing effort or even to organize follow-up activities.

We find that unionizing clerical workers requires a lot of really creative work and a direct-action, issue-oriented approach to organizing. We also find it useful to encourage workers to demand the full extent of their rights within their employer's personnel policy. When the employer fails to come through, that exposes the true face of management to the workers, and makes them more conscious of the dividing line between workers and employers.

OTEP's most successful program with unorganized workers was at a private university in the Boston area, where educational institutions are among the largest employers of clerical workers. The university had a management-sponsored staff association, which had some pro-union members who persuaded the association to sponsor a lunch-time educational series conducted by OTEP.



To publicize this series, women from the staff association and OTEP went around all the offices in the university. This also helped them accumulate lists of offices with clerical staff and the names of interested people, which proved very important later on.

The educational series had very good attendance, and at the end a committee was formed on office technology. They then held a public meeting with the university's director of health and safety. This was a great meeting, because most of the women in the audience already knew the answers to the questions they were asking the director! It became clear to those women workers that the university didn't take the health hazards of VDTs seriously.

The Technology Committee's next project was a health and safety survey, which proved to be a very useful organizing tool. The organizers talked to workers throughout the university about the issues, distributed the survey to every office with clerical staff, and then went back to pick them up. In this way, they built up a strong communication network.

However, by this time, OTEP was already doing educational work at other offices, and we could not do any further follow-up at the university. The Technology Committee was not able to sustain their activities. But fortunately, a union became interested in organizing at that university. They came to OTEP, and were very impressed with the information that we and the Technology Committee had gathered, including our lists of contacts and activities. The union used this work to launch an organizing drive in the university.

We would be very pleased if OTEP's educational work could always play that kind of role. But it's not often that we are able to work within situations that are so ripe for organizing.

At the moment, unions are not doing much organizing work among clerical workers. We also find that unions are reluctant to experiment with different strategies in organizing clerical workers. Our experience is that if we want to encourage a union to be more open to new approaches, we need to develop a close relationship with them.

Public Education

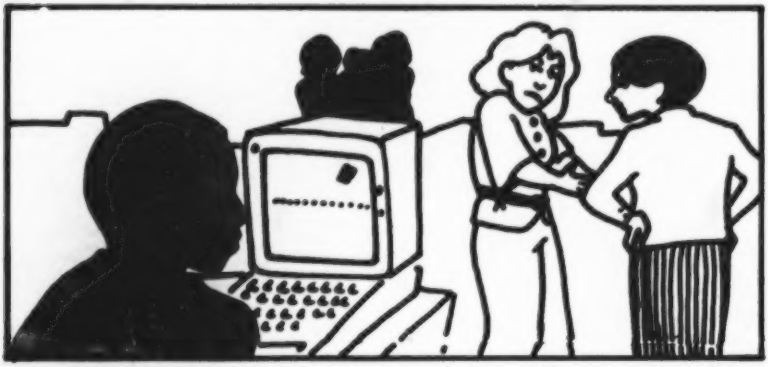
Another way OTEP reaches unorganized clerical workers is through public education. But it is hard for us to attract clerical workers to education programs that are open to the general public. We can't make those three follow-up phone calls one needs to persuade people to attend an event. Participants at our public educational events come from many different offices, so they do not share the community of interest that is essential for union organizing. The women who come to our education meetings go back to their offices on their own, and it's hard for them to have the time and courage to organize on their own.

Our public education activities included a lunch-time workshop in the downtown area of Boston, which we publicized by distributing leaflets outside office buildings and at subways and bus stops. Attendance was good, and the workshop itself was successful. However, follow-up work was difficult. We also held a four-part workshop which brought out a number of participants with the help of leaflets and an article in the local newspaper. But the participants were mainly middle level management, not women clerical workers.

Unionized Workers

In unionized offices, we train union stewards, and use the educational process to get workers excited about challenging new technology. We encourage workers to form new "technology committees," as these can play an important role in, for example, advising negotiating committees. In some cases, the technology committees prove to be a challenge to the union leadership, who may not be accustomed to having an active membership. We've seen cases where activists have been discouraged by union leaders who say, "You don't need to do this, we'll take care of it." But we can't play any further role.

Coalition on New Office Technology



Our primary activity in 1987 was launching a new coalition called the Massachusetts Coalition on New Office Technology. We organized a conference on office automation, which was a great success. Over 250 people came, representatives of organizations and individuals who are committed to winning office workers some control and benefits from the introduction of new technology. We closed the conference by deciding to form this organization.

We think the coalition is very important in building solidarity between unions, because it is very difficult to get unions in the U.S. to work together. Since unions represent the only organized constituencies affected by the new technology, we hope this new coalition will eventually be a significant step forward in organizing clerical workers. We are devoting a lot of time to building the membership of the coalition.

The coalition has two immediate priorities. One is to continue providing educational programs. There's still tremendous interest in the basic health and safety aspects of the new technology, especially among union members. That information still isn't widely available.

Our other priority is to build a campaign around one specific issue, and the coalition has chosen the issue of computer monitoring of clerical workers. It's a big issue these days. Women workers who are monitored hate it, and they have a lot to say about it. And office workers who are not monitored cannot believe their ears when it's described to them.

Monitoring is a particularly useful political issue because it also raises the larger questions of how technology is changing the content of work, the number of jobs available, and changing the society as a whole. For example, secret monitoring makes you think how much your employer has the right to invade your privacy, as it allows employers to eavesdrop on personal conversations. The issue of computer monitoring also combines the health concerns, and the wider jobs and employment questions. We need this kind of combination to build a strong campaign.

As the first step in the monitoring campaign, OTEP is planning to do a grassroots survey of office workers in Massachusetts to determine the extent and type of monitoring and how employers are making use of the information they're collecting. We are starting with a survey because there's still very little concrete information available about how much monitoring is taking place. Even the government can't get companies to disclose the ways they're using monitoring.

We plan to distribute at least 10,000 copies of the survey, largely through unions active in the coalition. The unions which could be most active are those which represent workers in the telephone company, and other customer services like utilities and airlines. It is those areas where it's more likely that monitoring is taking place. We'll also hold public meetings in different regions of the state, and try to include workers in industries, like insurance and banking, which have the largest numbers of minority and unorganized workers.

Working Together

Our experience at OTEP in trying to reach unorganized workers has taught us that labor organizations, unorganized office workers and women's organizations need to work together. If we can build this unity, then we can begin to fight for women workers to have some control over new technology, and to benefit from new technology.

■The Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health (SCCOSH)

In Silicon Valley, California, the electronics industry is the largest employer. The Valley, which lies just south of San Francisco, is home to more than 500 electronics companies which employ more than 200,000 people. More than 75 percent of the production workers are women, and at least 40 percent of them are colored. These female semi-conductor production workers are among the most poorly paid industrial workers in the United States today. Their starting wages are barely over minimum wage. There are no unions in electronic plants, job security is non-existent, and workers are constantly faced with the threat of plant closures due to the availability of cheaper labor in other states or countries.

Despite the "clean" image of the electronics industry in Silicon Valley, workers in micro-processor production are exposed to a huge array of toxic chemicals, including substances linked to birth defects, cancer and other chronic health problems. Recently, a woman who had worked for six years in a GTE-Lenkurt plant in New Mexico was diagnosed as having malignant melanoma, a deadly form of cancer. She attributes this to her repeated exposure

to solvents and other toxins at work. She is one of the 96 workers at the same plant who are sueing the company with claims of disease or illness caused by exposure to dangerous chemicals.

Chemicals used in the industry are also showing up in drinking water in surrounding areas, and are being linked with high rates of miscarriages and birth defects in these communities.

In response to the deadly hazards posed by the chemicals used in the industry, a number of groups were formed in the Silicon Valley to provide information, education and advocacy to workers in the area.

The Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health (SCCOSH) has become known as a resource center on health issues related to "high-tech" industries. They operate a confidential "hot line" for electronics workers and are handling requests for help from across the United States. They also offer workshops and produce educational booklets and fact-sheets.

The Santa Clara Center also helped initiate and continues to support a group called Injured Workers United. This is a self-help and support group for workers injured on the job, usually due to chemical exposure in Silicon Valley plants. The group evolved after workers started to claim compensation for chemical exposure and were met with resistance and discouragement. Local state and federal regulatory bodies have done very little to inform or to protect production workers from many workplace hazards. Injured Workers United has campaigned effectively for quality medical care, re-training services and a more responsive system of worker's compensation for workplace related injuries and diseases.

The Santa Clara Center is also Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition which came about with the discovery of widespread groundwater contamination by the electronics companies in the area. The Coalition has been working for over four years on ways to prevent and remove this contamination. It has compiled extensive data on chemical storage and toxic waste-handling practices and problems and associated health effects.

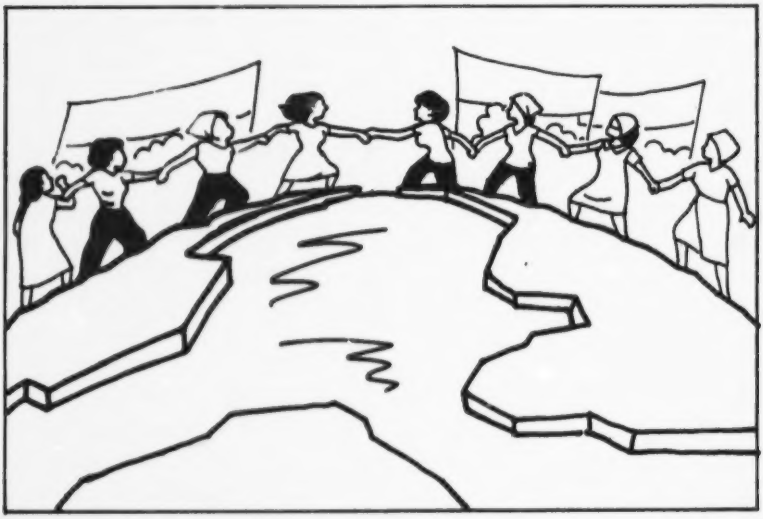
All of these groups are members of Integrated Circuit, a nationwide organization of activists and environmentalists concerned with labor conditions, health and safety problems, and the environmental impact of "high-tech" industries. They recently launched major new campaigns to rid workplaces of chemicals hazardous to the reproductive capacity of both women and men.

Linking Up Struggles

Worker solidarity is usually channeled through international trade union federations, which have been divided since the 1950s along Cold War lines. However, in recent decades several developments have created other avenues for forging solidarity links. One is the rise of broad-based international movements that are opposed to the role in the Third World of the U.S. government and its allies and that support peace and self-determination in South Africa, Central America, Southeast Asia, and other regions.

Many countries have also experienced tremendous advances in women's organizations and movements, and in progressive or independent trade unions. Both the women's groups and the unions are increasingly recognizing the importance of working with international movements for peace and national liberation. All of these different trends are now contributing to the beginnings of women workers' solidarity networks, which are often independent of international trade union federations.

The conference in Manila is an outgrowth of these positive trends. The participation of women from so many different countries and organizations signaled a commitment towards breaking down the barriers between women workers globally,



and contributing to the building of solidarity links. This is particularly important for women workers around the world who toil at different stages of micro-chips and electronic products on the global assembly line. They urgently need mutual support links to confront an industry highly controlled by global corporations.

A first step in this process is for educators and organizers to integrate an international perspective into all of their work, and to organize international support for each others' campaigns. This can take a number of forms. Some groups at the conference expressed the need for exchange of information – which would be made available to workers – about specific companies and their products, particularly the identification of products used for military purposes, as well as data on health and safety hazards, and on the micro-electronics industry in general.

The conference also cited ways in which exchange visits among organizers could play an important role in building closer ties among workers who are either in the same industry or work for the same company in different countries. This can provide the groundwork for international support for strikes and campaigns, and in the sharing of organizing experiences.

Critical questions were raised on some aspects of international solidarity work. A group cited the trend of multinationals transferring their factories from one country to another. This creates competition and divisions among women workers in different countries, making the building of international solidarity even more difficult. At the time of the conference, however, only limited information was available on these developments. The participants therefore noted the need for research, and for greater sharing of information on this among organizers and educators in different regions of the world.

As initial steps towards this effort, the participants agreed to: 1) share what they have learned with unions and women's groups in their respective countries, 2) build on the links developed at the meeting and 3) to keep each other up-to-date on our organizing, educational and research work.

Following is a discussion of the work of some organizations engaged in international solidarity and which were present in the conference.

■SOBE–Netherlands: Linking up Struggles Around a Single Multinational Corporation.

SOBE – (Foundation for Research on the Electrotechnical Industry), is a small independent organization which coordinates solidarity actions and research with workers and trade unions inside Philips plants in the Netherlands and many other countries. Philips is a giant Dutch industrial complex which ranks among the world's largest suppliers of radio and electronic equipment. "We established SOBE ten years ago, when Philips was starting the trend of moving its production out of the Netherlands," said Ria Hermanussen, a member of SOBE. "We found that workers, particularly women workers, were experiencing a lot of job and income insecurity."

SOBE carries out detailed research on Philips operations around the world, and we make this available to workers. Our goal is to keep workers informed about new developments in the corporation. We have found that there is a real need for this type of work, because trade unions often don't have the time, knowledge and capacity to do corporate research, particularly about company developments in other countries.

Our other major goals are to support the action of Philips workers and to build solidarity between Philips workers in different parts of the world, so that they will not be played off against one another. For example, when there is a strike at a

Philips factory, we contact the local union and gather information about the strike. We then share this information with other Philips workers, and coordinate financial and moral support for the strikers.

International solidarity actions like these are vehemently opposed by Philips. They claim that Philips national companies are autonomous. This is not true, but they have used it as an excuse to refuse to meet delegation of workers from other countries. We have also seen cases where the corporation has tried to prevent workers from going to international meetings of Philips workers.

In 1982, we organized a meeting of Philips workers from around the world, which was a big step forward in our work. It focused on the introduction of new technology, new product developments and the situation of women workers. The workers who participated concluded that they still did not have enough access to in-depth information about the company's operations and strategy. They agreed that a newsletter would help to answer this need. So the 1982 conference asked SOBE to help establish a newsletter which would gather information from Philips workers around the world about the introduction of new technology, the development of new product lines and trade union struggles.

Our group has also helped to bring Philips workers together at many other smaller meetings. For example, updates on management strategies have been shared at meetings of Philips workers from different European countries. This conference in the Philippines has been particularly very useful because it gave me the opportunity to meet workers in Philips factories in Manila. I discovered that they are making exactly the same products as the factories in the Netherlands, although in Manila, production is technologically more advanced. Through these contacts, our group will try to help build more direct links between workers in the Netherlands and the Philippines.

We also have plans for an international meeting of workers from Philips' light-bulb factories. We think that strong solidarity links between these workers, who produce virtually the same item, will be a significant step forward.

■Committee for Asian Women (CAW) – An Experience in Regional Networking

The Committee on Asian Women (CAW) began in 1981 as a networking organization addressing the concerns of women workers across Asia. "We aim to raise awareness about the commonalities in the situation of women workers around the world – particularly in Asia – as well as to encourage organizing among women workers," said CAW member Wang Ka Po, in this interview.

An important area of our work is organizing conferences and workshops. We have held two regional conferences; one focused on the textile industry, and the other on the electronics industry. They were occasions where women workers from the same industry in different countries came together to analyze and strategize. We also cooperate with groups in organizing local workshops, inputting ideas and experiences gathered from other places, and helping to locate materials and resource people.

Another of CAW's ongoing areas of work is organizing exchange programs for women workers, which have allowed us to assist women from Thailand and Malaysia to go to the Philippines for training and exposure to different experiences and approaches to organizing.

We often participate in solidarity appeals, like the current one about the sexual torture of a women organizer in South Korea. We are trying to publicize this case internationally, but we find that our international links are limited, because so much of our work is focused on the Asian region.

When we look back over the past five years since CAW was founded, we see the need for greater information exchange. We have been approached by women workers in several countries for information about particular companies or multinationals. This information is needed by unions and other groups to help them organize women workers. We now believe that it would be very useful if there is a formal or informal clearing house where this type of corporate information and research could be gathered.

Post Conference Reflections

In the months since the conference took place in Manila, the organizers have tried to reflect critically on its successes and limitations, and to get feedback from as many participants as possible. This last section includes some of these thoughts.

The meeting in the Philippines was an important moment in the efforts of women organizers and educators to collectively develop their analyses and strategies, and consolidate contacts. This opportunity for grassroots organizers from different countries to share experiences and strategies was especially useful for women from the Asian region, who made up the majority of conference participants.

Some of the conference highlights included recent developments in the micro-chip production industry, particularly the serious unemployment among women assembly workers, caused by automation on assembly lines and slumps in micro-chip sales. Detailed information on working conditions and health hazards in the industry was shared. The multinationals' practice of shifting operations was also discussed, particularly the ways in which this posed complex barriers to building international solidarity.

While there is a big potential for organizing workers around a single multinational corporation as shown by the experience of SOBE, organizing around a single industry (e.g. micro-chips industry) and around Free Trade Zones, as exemplified by the experiences of the Philippines and other Third World countries,

may also present a strong potential for confronting the multinational corporations.

Unfortunately, the conference did not explore the issue of divisions and competition between women workers in different regions, and other barriers to international solidarity, as thoroughly as would have been desired. There is a need to have more discussions on how to overcome international divisions among workers.

Conference organizers also noted the need for more research on recent advances in satelite technology that permit data-processing and other office work to be similarly moved around the world.

It was clear from the conference discussions that efforts to counter this high mobility of international capital depend on two factors: first, the development of militant workers' movements, and second, the building of international networks that support the struggles of women workers. These two efforts also need to be mutually supportive.

There were some other missing links in the discussion. While women from unions and educational groups representing office workers were present, it was difficult to integrate their situations and strategic priorities with those of assembly workers. Their presence, however, reflect a commitment to build links between the women in the Third World who make automated office equipments and the office workers in industrialized countries who use those equipments.

But although it made sense at a conceptual level to make this extension of the global assembly line from the production stage to the implementation stage, it was difficult to give it relevance in practice, given the vast differences in work situations of Third World workers and workers in industrialized countries. This raises the issue that networking should first be rooted in links at the national or regional level, before attempting to bridge the differences in experiences at the international level.

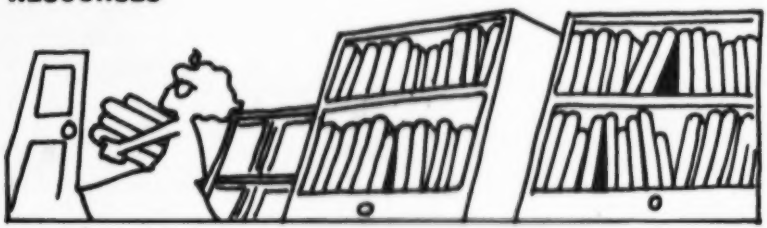
However, the discussion of participants from Asia, who are all involved in micro-chip production, were particularly useful. This confirms that the goal of building international solidarity among women workers will have greater success if it first focuses on solidarity links between women workers in the same sector or industry. It also shows that networks based at the regional level

offer more potential for sharing experiences and strategies, and that strong regional networks can then be the basis for building international links. At this point, it seems that although it is important to keep in touch with regions, international networks will remain shallow and weak unless they are more strongly rooted in regional networks made up of broad-based local organizations.

The participants from the Third World also analyzed the role played by their governments in creating economic and political climates that only serve the multinationals and local elites, and which fail to develop self-reliant economies and democratic politics that benefit the interests of the majority of their people. The presence of many U.S.-backed repressive regimes, in the Third World raised anew the issue of the international political power of the U.S. and its allies, and of the need to build international movements which can successfully challenge them.

The discussions also served as a reminder of the inaccuracy of the myth that working people, particularly women, are passive. From every country, participants learned of militant and courageous organizing and educational efforts of women workers despite the various forms of repression which many women have to face. But it was also acknowledged that women are always the least organized sector of workers, and much work remains to be done in mobilizing and empowering women for their own interests. Participants from Europe and North America agreed that mass-based women's organizations were often more highly developed in Third World countries. All the participants were particularly impressed with the achievements of women activists in the Philippines. But it will require careful reflection and analysis to understand how the lessons of those movements can be applied to women's organizing in industrialized societies.

RESOURCES



A number of groups represented at the meeting publish regular newsletters related to the impact of micro-chip technology on workers and/or to building international links between women workers. Following is a list of some of these newsletters and some other useful publications:

Asian Women Workers Newsletter, published four times a year by the Committee for Asian Women (CAW), 57 Peking Road, 5/F Kowloon, Hong Kong.

CAW is an Asian regional organization that builds links between women workers and organizers. The newsletter reports on the living and working conditions of Asian women workers and their struggles for equality and liberation.

Automated Times, A Massachusetts Newsletter on Office Automation, published by Office Technology Education Project (OTEP), 6 Newsome Park, Jamaica Plain, MA, 02130, U.S.A.

Connecta: Quarterly International Information Bulletin for Philips Workers published by SOBE, Demer 38, 5611 AS Eindhoven, Netherland.

Chapkis, Wendy and Enloe, Cynthia, editors, *Of Common Cloth. Women in the Global Textile Industry*, published by the Transnational Institute, Paulus Potterstraat 20, 1071 DA Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

This book is based on a meeting of women in the international textile and clothing industry, which was held in Amsterdam in 1982.

Cuando trabajar es un infierno, Las mujeres y la nueva division international del trabajo (When work is hell, Women and the new international division of labour), published by the Centro de Investigacion para la Accion Feminina (CIPAF), Louis F. Thomen No. 358, ENS. QUISQUEYA, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

This popular education booklet is about free trade zones as a new form in the oppression and subordination of women. A second volume will focus on the situation in the Dominican Republic. *Quehaceres*, CIPAF's monthly publication (also in Spanish) often has analysis of the situation of women workers.

Hiroki, Michiko, Center for Asian Women Workers' Fellowship, *In the Shadow of Affluence: Stories of Japanese Women Workers*, published by the Committee for Asian Women (CAW), 5th Floor, 57 Peking Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong (1986).

The Center for Asian Women Workers' Fellowship can be contacted at 2-3-18-34 Nishi-Waseda, Shintuku-ku, Tokyo 160, Japan.

Listen Real Loud, News of Women's Liberation Worldwide, published by the Nationwide Women's Program of the American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA, 19102, U.S.A.

This newsletter regularly features a section on "Women and Global Corporations" about the expanding international network of individuals and groups involved in research, education, support, and direct organizing related to global industries.

Lives and Struggles of Women Workers in the Philippines, produced by the Center for Women's Resources (CWR), 2nd Floor, Mar Santos Building, 43 Roces Ave., Quezon City, Philippines (1985).

The first section of this publication is a report on a CWR research project analyzing the conditions and struggles of women workers in Manila and the Bataan Export Processing Zone; the second includes narratives of the lives of five women workers in the textile, food and electronics industries.

Mitter, Swasti, *Common Fate, Common Bond. Women in the Global Economy*, published by Pluto Press, 105A Torriano Avenue, London, U.K. NW5 2RX (1986).

This book is an in-depth analysis of recent developments in the international division of labour and their impact on women workers, particularly black and immigrant women workers in the sweatshops of industrialized countries.

Short Circuit: Women on the Global Assembly Line, produced by the Participatory Research Group (PRG), 229 College Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 1R4 Canada (1985).

This booklet looks at the role of women workers in each of the steps involved in the assembly and use of micro-electronics products in different regions of the world.

Short Circuit: Women in the Automated Office, produced by the Participatory Research Group, Canada (1985).

This booklet is about the jobs and health issues facing Canadian women workers with the introduction of electronic office equipment.

Sistren, published by the Sistren Theatre Collective, 20 Kensington Crescent, Kingston 5, Jamaica.

Provides information about Sistren's activities, as well as general information about women's issues and organizing in the Caribbean. The Dec. 1986-Jan. 1987 issues includes articles on women workers in Free Trade Zones.

Women in Action, published by ISIS International, Casilla 2067 – Correo Central, Santiago, Chile.

This is published twice a year, and contains information on events, groups, new resources and campaigns organized by women in different regions of the world.

Women Working Worldwide. The International Division of Labour in the Electronics, Clothing and Textiles Industries, published by War on Want, Three Castles House, 1 London Bridge St., London, U.K. SE1 9SG.

This booklet is a report of a conference which took place in London in 1983.

The conference "Micro-Chip Technology and Its Impact on the Lives of Workers" was co-sponsored by:

Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan – KMK (Women Worker's Movement), is the women's organization of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement) the militant trade union federation of the Philippines. With over 15,000 members, the KMK organizes women workers to fight gender oppression as well as class exploitation.

Center for Women's Resources, Manila, a research, education and training institution, which also builds links with women's groups within the country and internationally, serves the educational needs of member organizations of GABRIELA, the national women's coalition, and maintains a library.

Women's Center, Manila, is an educational and service institution for women workers, which works closely with the KMK. It maintains a reading center where women workers can have access to reading materials on women, labor, and national issues.

The Women's Program of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) works with groups and individuals in different regions of the world who are developing popular forms of education which address women's issues. The Women's Program aims to contribute to the development of a feminist popular education that connects broad social struggles with the personal issues and oppression women face daily.

Participatory Research Group (PRG), Toronto, is a popular education collective which coordinates the ICAE Women's Program in consultation with representatives from various regions. PRG has also been involved in the issue of micro-technology and women for several years, doing research, producing educational materials, organizing workshops and conferences, and has a resource center for public use.